

Chapter 1

Home Sweet Home

The Sikorsy SH-60 Seahawk flew low over the ocean, low enough that a cool mist splashed William Drake in the face through the open bay doors. He could taste salt on his lips and feel the roaring wind rush past his ears.

Handcuffed to a steel pivot-loop on the floor of the chopper, Drake glared out at the miles of endless ocean. He had lost sight of the mainland nearly an hour ago, after take-off from the holding centre on St. John's Harbour – the very edge of Newfoundland and Labrador on the North American continent. Nothing but dark, deep waters stretched over the horizon. The sky was bruised purple, heading towards nightfall.

It was cold aboard the chopper, but Drake refused to let his jailers see him shake. Also on board were two armed guards, both wearing sealed gas masks and carrying sleek semi-automatic rifles. They sat menacing and silent by the cockpit doors, their eyes unseen behind tinted plastic. Drake was bound at the ankles to a group of six other prisoners. Four girls and two boys all about his age.

He had lost track of the days while on the run, but he knew his fifteenth birthday had been in the last week or so. There was a good chance he was the youngest prisoner aboard, but that didn't make him the weakest.

Not by a long shot.

Strands of strawberry-blonde hair hid one girl's face. She had started crying five minutes into the flight and hadn't stopped since. None of the others had tried to comfort her. A stocky boy on Drake's left with spiked purple hair – Drake tagged him as Mohawk – sneered at the girl. Drake knew little about where they were going, as the Rig was shrouded in secrecy, but he knew enough not to cry.

‘Five miles out.’ A voice clouded in static transmitted into the cabin.

Drake turned back out to sea, scanning the horizon for their destination. He spotted it in the distance, rising out of the water like some dilapidated demon of steel and smoke.

The Rig.

An old oil platform that had been converted into the world’s first floating rehabilitation centre. The Rig was actually five platforms, one at each point of the compass, connected by networks of metal walkways and orange pipes, and a final platform in the middle of the structure. From the air, the Rig was shaped almost like a diamond.

Another cage, Drake thought bitterly.

Drake watched the Rig grow larger from his seat on the edge of the chopper. In the vast and murky ocean, it was the only manmade structure. For all that mattered, this far out to sea, the Rig could have been the only dry land left in the world.

The chopper landed on a wide helipad marked with yellow paint on the southern platform. Their shackles were unlocked from the chopper’s floor and Drake was offloaded along with his fellow prisoners. More faceless guardsmen met them here.

With a hard shove from a guard, Drake stumbled forwards, shuffling in his ankle cuffs. The seven of them were lined up along the edge of the helipad. They stood shivering and alone as the Seahawk was quickly refuelled by a ground crew and took off back the way it had come to St. John’s.

A large man dressed in a fine suit – *too fine for this place*, Drake thought – waddled up to them with his thumbs tucked into the loopholes of his pants and a smirk on his face. His tie was tucked into his belt, and his neck jiggled as he spoke.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,’ he said, smiling at each of them in turn. ‘My name is Jonathan Rayland Storm. You may call me Warden Storm. Let me be the first to welcome you to the Rig.’ His gaze settled on Drake last of all, and he did not look away. The warden’s smile turned into something nasty as they stared at each other.

‘You must be my special case,’ he said, inclining an invisible hat. ‘Well, you ain’t so special here, son. A few days of work in Tubes will see to that.’ He opened his arms and gestured to the group at large. ‘We live by rules here on my five platforms. As you can see, there is no escape. Nothing around you for a hundred miles but freezing water infested with some of the *meanest* sharks to ever grace God’s green earth.’

He dabbed at his brow with a cream handkerchief.

‘Only you won’t find any of that earth around here, no matter how hard you look. So you will follow my rules. You will call me Sir, or Warden Storm,’ he said, repeating himself. ‘You will address all of the guards as Officer.’

‘Alliance Systems, among other exciting ventures, provides the *finest* custodial services in the world, as some of you already know.’ The warden chortled. ‘Ten years ago in 2015, after the eastern platform you see just over there was decommissioned, the Alliance built the rest of this place, and since then it has become the foremost centre for violent offender rehabilitation on the planet. You are lucky to be here.’

Drake tried hard to suppress a smirk at that and failed.

‘If you’ve been sent to me, to my Rig, you are all criminals, no matter your age, and have been sentenced to no less than five years of rehabilitative incarceration by your respective national governments. This old girl is your home for the next half decade, if not more. You will hate it here. You will hate me. That’s just fine. Keep your head down, do your work, and once your time is up we will send you home a productive member of society.’

As the warden finished his introduction, Drake ran his eyes across the visible structure of the oil rig. He counted three guards behind Storm, plus the two from the helicopter. There was a shadowy figure stationed up in the command tower. Call that another prison officer.

That made at least six unique guards, all faceless and armed with automatic weapons and nasty-looking black batons. *There'll be more*, Drake thought, licking the salt from his lips.

Drake had known men like Warden Storm before. Men who sat in seats of power and absolute authority. Men who controlled everything about their private worlds. The face of the man often changed but, in Drake's experience, they were always the same in one regard.

They were overconfident.

So Drake believed the warden when he spoke of shark-infested waters and the rules by which he was supposed to abide. He believed it as much as the man himself did. But his overconfidence, his arrogance, made him overlook one key factor. One small, yet important detail.

There is no escape, Warden Jonathan Rayland Storm had said, and it was there that he and Drake would have to disagree.

Because there wasn't a prison built – on God's green earth or otherwise – that could hold Will Drake.

